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Conservatism and Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century

Napoleon and the French Revolution started and contributed to the spreading of ideas of equality, liberty and fraternity. However, after the whole debacle with Napoleon and his widespread influence on the entire European nation, there were various solutions that emerged in response to the chaos. While both political conservatism and political liberalism surfaced to try and solve the same various issues that arose in the 1800s, the two ideologies differ in their opposing methods and views of government and individualism and by the fact of who supports which faction.

Political conservatism and liberalism both developed in response to the French Revolution and its impact on Europe, and furthermore, they both tried to find a solution to solve the same problem, just had varying methods to do so. After seeing France become so powerful and cause so much chaos, Europeans created new solutions to try and prevent that from repeating. The two main responses were conservatism and liberalism. The conservatives started a new concert system starting with the Congress of Vienna that focused on how to repair Europe. The Congress of Vienna tried to counteract the ideas of the revolution and reestablish the role of power pre-revolution era—restoring old monarchies. Because Europeans had already been exposed to the concept of equality and were then being forced to reverse and conform to old monarchies, some people believed liberalism was the correct solution. Liberalism focused more on the individual by advocating for a laissez-faire economy, which promotes the middle class individual to gain a profit. Despite their different methods, conservatism and liberalism both arose as new philosophies in response to hectic Europe at that time.

During the nineteenth century, conservatives and liberals disagreed in the way the government should be run and how the government should control various aspects in society. Conservatism valued tradition in all aspects of life. The Congress of Vienna, a clear example of a conservative institution, reestablished legitimacy, the restoration of rightful monarchs, throughout Europe’s strongest powers. Metternich, the minister of Austria and the main voice in the Congress of Vienna, believed that legitimacy should reign because that is the only solution to suppress rebellion and limit the power of the average person. Despite Metternich doing these things for possible selfish reasons, the concert system, and overall conservatism deemed successful because there were no major wars until WWI. However, there were several uprisings in various locations. Another aspect of the congress system was collective security. When one country was experiencing an uprising, the congress would get together and collectively decide to help fight off the threat to the monarch. For example, when conflict arose in Naples, the Congress of Troppau in 1820 brought the leaders of the nations to decide what to do. Britain and France demurred, but Austria along with Prussia and Russia decided to subdue the revolt in Italy. On the other hand, the ideas of the Enlightenment and French revolution could not be ignored or forgotten; liberalism acted as a powerful philosophy of positive change in terms of government and its role concerning the individual. Liberals claim that the problem with the Revolution was that the average man received power, but liberals believe that if educated individuals held the power then they would take care of society and truly reform it for the better. Politically, liberals favored the social contract theory advocated by John Locke. They wished to have limited government control over various aspects such as religious toleration, laissez-faire economy, and individual rights. British philosopher Jeremy Bentham articulated that the purpose of government was to promote the “greatest good for the greatest number.” John Stuart Mill helped provide one of the most eloquent defenses on individual rights with his book *On Liberty*. Conservatism and Liberalism are completely different in that they have different outlooks on the role of government and how government should act in terms of society.

Besides from being fundamentally opposing, the primary objective of whom they benefit created a major difference between the two ideas. Human nature states that people support what will benefit them the most. While it might be morally wrong, if it benefits them, they tend to usually not care. This scenario is true for conservatives and liberals. Clergy and aristocrats were mostly conservatives because for them, conservatism gave them the most power. It makes sense that they would go along with conservatism because conservatism favored the Old Regime and aristocrats and clergy were considered the top two estates in the Old Regime. In addition, Metternich, who was the minister of the great empire at the time, Austria, was not going to give up his own power to the people. He wanted to strengthen his power and the other old monarchies around Europe because it directly benefits him, the actions of the Congress of Vienna. Because Austria is compiled of several nationalities and ethnic groups, the spread of liberalism (along with nationalism) would incite each group to rebel against the conservative power and break up the Austrian empire. In contrast, political liberalism was focused on the people; therefore, new industrial middle class, bankers, merchants, manufacturers, professionals, and office holders adopted the ideology as its own because these people want individual freedom as opposed to being oppressed by leaders who feel entitled because of their birthright. The difference of class who supported either conservatism or liberalism is extremely apparent.

In conclusion, political conservatism and political liberalism are similar in the fact they are proposed solutions to restructure Europe, but they greatly differ in their outlooks of the role of government in politics and society. The distinct separation of class on who supported one of the ideologies also created a major difference between conservatism and liberalism. While political conservatism focused on maintaining tradition in all aspects of life, liberalism advocated for change for a less involved government, the freedoms of the individual, and religious rights for every man. Predictably, nobles and clergymen supported conservatism for its favor towards the Old Regime, and the working middle class supported liberalism for its individual freedoms and more power within the government. Nowadays, the terms “conservatism” and “liberalism” have quite different meanings than they did in the nineteenth century. The modern conservative would generally coincide with a classical liberal, one who favors a more laissez-faire economic and political philosophy. In contemporary politics, a liberal indicates one who supports wealth redistribution to aid the less fortunate. Although classical conservatism and liberalism might have evolved from the same source, they have different people who they cater to and different outlooks on government structure and society, which is the same basis for the modern ideologies.